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ABSTRACT

This edited transcription of a presentation by Susan Imel and Judy Wagner, of the ERIC Clearinghouse on Adult, Career, and Vocational Education, discusses the use of the Internet in adult education and family literacy programs. Issues discussed include models of technology instruction, adult learning characteristics, and World Wide Web sites of potential interest for adult education. The paper concludes with two appendices--one listing family literacy/technology Web sites and electronic discussion lists and another giving responses to a survey posted to electronic discussion lists about the use of technology in family literacy programs. (LPP)

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The Internet as an Instructional Tool in Family Literacy Programs

Susan Imel & Judy Wagner

Abstract

This edited transcription of a presentation by Susan Imel and Judy Wagner, from the ERIC Clearinghouse on Adult, Career, and Vocational Education, discusses the use of the Internet in adult education and family literacy programs. Issues discussed include models of technology instruction, adult learning characteristics, and World Wide Web sites of potential interest for adult education.

Introduction

We very much wanted to be a part of this conference, but we had to think about it because the areas that the conference covers are not exactly the areas that our Clearinghouse—the ERIC Clearinghouse on Adult, Career, and Vocational Education—covers, or that we personally worked with. We decided to put together a presentation that discusses how family literacy programs are using the Internet. However, because we could not get a lot of information from family literacy programs or through the usual sources about how family literacy programs are using the Internet, we broadened it to include information about literacy programs in general and how they are using the Internet. I would also like to say that we are looking at this in terms of family literacy from the adult participant, because we cover the field of adult education, and in family literacy programs, sometimes there are programs or segments of family literacy programs that focus on the adults and generally that's the mothers.

I'd like to tell you just a little bit about what we're going to do and then see if perhaps you have questions or concerns that you think may not be addressed. The first thing that we're going to do is spend some time talking about technology, in particular models of instruction in terms of technology, and also describe some characteristics of adult learning. Then we're going to launch off into some of the specific examples of Internet use that we've collected that illustrate how family literacy programs are using the Internet, and then we are going to give you some examples of how adult literacy and basic education programs are using the Internet. We compiled a list of Web sites that have been reviewed (Appendix A), and we also have some specific lessons related to the use of the Internet. Again, it may be of some use to you if you are particularly interested in using the Internet as an instructional source. Finally, we're going to talk about how and why the Internet can be used effectively.

Models of Technology Instruction

In thinking about using the Internet as an instructional tool, I think it's good to review some of the integration models of how technology can be used, some of which Mike Eisenberg touched on in his presentation. The first model of technology use is when technology actually is the curriculum, when you use technology as the focus—for example, if you are teaching word processing or spreadsheets or any of the common software tools. One of the drawbacks to this model, which Mike also mentioned in his presentation, is that frequently this kind of curriculum model or this kind of use of technology in instruction does not give a context for the learners. They are just learning the application without necessarily learning how it's used. I think about myself and how I first learned word processing. I never took a word-processing course specific to a package until I had actually done some

FL 027191

work with word processing so I knew what I wanted to do with it.

Another model that is used in adult literacy is when the technology is used simply as the delivery mechanism. I did some work several years ago in workplace literacy, and it was very common to get advertisements or have vendors contact us who wanted us to buy their program. They're called individual learning systems, and everything is in the system that the learner needs. It's very skill-specific. Learners work individually, and they really are just using the technology to learn a discrete set of skills, such as mathematics or reading. The Pal System is one that I know of that was quite popular in the late 1980s and early 1990s for workplace literacy programs. For some reason, a lot of the companies had developed these learning systems that they wanted literacy programs to buy, probably because they thought that the workplace literacy programs had money. One of the many drawbacks to these systems is that they're really expensive. Some of the other drawbacks again are similar to the curriculum model's—they do not necessarily teach skills in context.

A third model is where technology is used to complement instruction so that a program may use software packages that the learners use in conjunction with more traditional instruction. I'm sure you're familiar with this model. In fact, it's quite common now in adult literacy and basic education programs because many programs have computers and have been able to purchase software. But still, it's not integrated into the instruction.

The last integration model is when technology actually becomes an instructional tool, where the technology is really invisible. It's like using a chalkboard. We never even thought about it as a tool; it was just something there that supported instruction. The Internet in many ways is really an ideal tool if it's used appropriately because it can support instruction and there's many things that it can do—word processing or desktop publishing or spreadsheets. For example, your class might be doing a newspaper or a newsletter, and they would learn desktop publishing. They might do a writing assignment, and they would use word-processing software. They might be doing mathematics, and so they would be using spreadsheets. Rather than having software be the focus of the instruction, it supports the instruction. One of the ideal uses of the Internet is that it can support the instruction.

One of the drawbacks to the Internet is the expense. In fact, someone that I was sitting with at lunch said that she's working in a early childhood family literacy program, and one of the problems is there is not money to purchase computers. I think one of the drawbacks is that computers still in many locations are not affordable, which limits the access to the use of technology.

Adult Learning Characteristics

I'd like to talk just a little bit about some of the adult learning characteristics that make the Internet a particularly appropriate tool. When we talk about adult education for adult learners, we frequently begin by talking about the fact that adults are self-directed. This characteristic was popularized by a man named Malcolm Knowles. Also when we talk about working with adult learners, we talk about the need to be learner centered, to be centered on and focused on their needs.

Another characteristic of adult learners is that adults, generally, are very problem focused in their learning. They have a specific goal; they have come for a reason. Adults also are very interested in interactive kinds of learning and engaging in problem solving. Finally, it's very important for what adults are learning to be contextualized, for them to understand what the transfer is between what they're learning and how they can use it.

Just yesterday after we got here, I was looking at a newsletter that I got in my mail earlier in the week, *Focus on Basics.* It's put out by the National Center on Adult Learning and Literacy that's located at Harvard. They're a relatively new center (URL: http://hugse1.harvard.edu/~ncsall/). There was a very interesting article in the newsletter titled "Technology Melts the Classroom Walls." The author, Susan Cowles, an educator from California, was describing how the Internet helped her with a multilevel class. In fact, this whole issue is on working with adult multilevel classes.

I thought her explanation for why she liked using the Internet fit very well with these characteristics of adult learning. She said that she had three observations. The first is that she believes that any skill is learned best when embedded in content, especially when that content is of interest to the learner and has meaning in the context of the learner's life. Second, she believes that learning occurs when it is active and not passive—so there is the interactive group problem solving. Third, it

has been her experience that technology broadens the opportunity for teaching in context and for learning in an active way. She actually began this article by talking about three questions that people in her class proposed, and how they found the answers to these questions through the Internet.

Web Sites

In preparation for this presentation, we put an announcement on a listserv that is run by the National Institute for Literacy. They moderate several different literacy listservs; for example, the Workplace Forum, the Family Forum, the ESL Literacy Forum, the Learning Disabilities (LD) Forum, the Homeless Forum, the Health Forum, the Technology Forum, and the National Literacy Advocacy Forum. We contacted two listservs—one that discussed technology and one that discussed family literacy. (These are very good listservs, and if you have questions, there are wonderful discussions, and the people on them are very helpful and friendly.) We posted an announcement and explained that we were going to be making a presentation at this conference and asked people to tell us what they were doing with the Internet. "Are you using the Internet under family literacy programs? If so, what are you doing?" We did this sometime this summer, and we got absolutely nothing—no response. We finally decided that maybe it was the timing—maybe midsummer is not the time to ask these questions. So sometime in the middle of September, we thought, "Aha! The time is right." We posted practically the same message again—first, alerting people to the fact that this conference was being held and, second, to our desperate need for information about what they were doing with technology in their programs. Appendix B contains some examples of what we heard from people.

We looked through some of these responses and found them very interesting. One of our favorites was the Families and Their Work Web site (http://www.otan.dni.us/webfarm/emailproject/family.htm). When you visit this Web site, what you get are pictures that children have drawn as part of their program. It's just a fascinating and very interesting site about parents and children working together. We strongly recommend that you go in and look at this site.

In addition to posting to the listservs, we did a Web search on family literacy to locate some Web sites, which are listed in Appendix A. Some of these were ones that people had recommended to us, but we also did our own search. As Mike Eisenberg said, you put in "family literacy," and you get 4,327 or some ridiculous number of hits, but you could never look at all of them. We pulled up a few and tried to get ones that we knew were good and then others that were good representations of some of the Web sites that are available.

Judy and I actually had different experiences searching the Internet. Judy has been to a course. (She's an expert on searching the Internet.) I have not been to a course on searching the Internet, and when I searched, I did not search using family literacy. When we were thinking about doing this presentation, I was desperate to find information on how adult educators or adult basic and literacy educators are using the Internet, so in addition to searching ERIC, I did a Web search. One of the most interesting things that I turned up was the Adult Education Teacher's Annotated Webliography (http://www2.wgbh.org/MBCWEIS/LTC/ALRI/webliography.html). I am not sure what terms I used, but I think I used adult literacy and the Internet.

I would like to point out a few of the sites that I think would be particularly useful for family literacy programs. This is an example to me of what Michael Eisenberg was talking about in his presentation when he said you go in and you get a thousand hits or a hundred hits or fifty hits, and you're not exactly sure which one we should look at. The Webliography happens to be a list of sites that have been reviewed by adult literacy and basic education teachers. One of our favorites is called Collected Visions (http://cvisions.nyu.edu), and in some ways, I think it's similar to the Intergenerational Cultural Traditions Web site (http://www.otan.dni.us/webfarm/emailproject/cul.htm). The Collected Visions Web site is a collection of photographs. This would be a wonderful site to use in a family literacy program because it took families working together to create it. In addition to looking at the photographs that are on the site, people can actually submit their own photographs.

Another site that I thought had good application was the Family Math home page (http://theory.lcs.mit.edu/~emjordan/famMath.html), where you can subscribe to a newsletter or a listserv. Sites related to health include Community Outreach Health Information System at http://web.bu.edu/COHIS/ and Health-Links at http://phoenix.mcet.edu/

healthlinks. The last site that I picked out was The Email Project at http://www.otan.dni.us/webfarm/emailproject/email.htm.

I have a true confession to make. I had not thought too much about how the Internet could be used as an instructional tool in adult literacy and basic education or family literacy until we were getting ready to do this presentation. But now that I have thought about it and realized some of the applications, I really am tremendously excited about what can be done with it because I think it can support all of the best kinds of features of adult learning. For example, on The Email Project home page, there is a link to an Annotated Book Lists page that talks about family literacy programs. The goal is to have parents list books that they have enjoyed reading to or with their children so that others could benefit. This would be a place if you were interested in finding books, or you could have the people that were in your program actually go in and put their books on it.

The other thing that I found when I did my search was the Web-Based Lesson Plans site (http://www2.wgbh.org/mbcweis/ltc/alri/lessonplans.html), a companion resource to the Adult Education Teacher's Annotated Webliography. None of the plans is particularly related to family literacy, but most of them could be adapted or used in family literacy programs.

One that I was particularly interested in was the women's history Internet lesson. During the last year, one of my other ERIC colleagues, Sandra Kerka, and I did a lot of work with women and literacy. I was thinking this would really be a neat kind of project to do with mothers and daughters on women's history; that they could do it together. The drawback to this one is that it requires quite a few resources because it suggests using four computers—one with Internet access, one with the *Grolier Encyclopedia*, one with the *Webster's Encyclopedia*, and one with *Her Heritage*. But if you didn't have all of that software, you could use print resources to supplement what you were doing over the Internet.

Conclusion

One of the few printed items that I could find about how people are using the Internet in adult literacy and basic education is *Using the Internet in the Adult Basic Education Classroom: Learning Together through Experience*, by Margarete Epstein. This piece is published by the Ohio Literacy Resource Center and is also available on their Web site at http://archon.educ.kent.edu/Oasis/Pubs/0500-3.html. The Ohio Literacy Resource Center is the midwest regional technology hub for the National Institute for Literacy. They're organizing these technology hubs all over the country, and they have funded some programs in Internet use. This publication lists some of the goals for Internet use that I think are particularly applicable. It points out that the Internet expands the resources for the classroom, and also that you can use it for e-mail, listservs, and news groups. When we think about using the Internet only to go into those Web sites to get all of that wonderful information, we overlook some of the other attributes of Internet use. It improves computer literacy skills, provides very positive learning experiences, and reinforces and makes use of all of those characteristics of adult learning that I talked about earlier.

One of the other goals for the Internet use discussed in this publication is that it provide a vehicle for sharing program success, which is what we tried to do in preparing for this presentation. We tried to collect information from programs so that they had an opportunity to tell us what they were doing. I would just suggest that if you are interested in what happens when the Internet is used in adult literacy, this is a great piece.

APPENDIX A

Family Literacy/Technology Web Sites and Listservs

ERIC Clearinghouse on Adult, Career, and Vocational Education
http://ericacve.org

National Institute for Literacy
http://novel.nifl.gov
Technology Listerv:
nifl-technology@literacy.nifl.gov
Family Literacy Listserv:
nifl-family@literacy.nifl.gov

National Center for Family Literacy
http://www.famlit.org

Literacy Volunteers of America
http://www.songline.com/lva

Initiatives for Children
http://www.neosoft.com/~ifc/links/literacy.html

Media Literacy Online Project
http://interact.uroegon.edu/mediaLit/HomePage

Ohio Literacy Resource Center
http://archon.educ.kent.edu/Oasis/index.html

Family Literacy Center
http://www.indiana.edu/~eric_rec/fl/menu.html

The Barbara Bush Foundation
http://www.bushfoundation.com

Massachusetts Department of Education
http://info.doe.mass.edu/welcome/family.html

OTAN (Outreach and Technical Assistance Network)
http://www.otan.dni.us

Adult Education Teacher's Annotated Webliography
http://www2.wgbh.org/MBCWEIS/LTC/ALRI/webliography.html

APPENDIX B

Listserv Responses

In preparation for this program, a message was sent to several listservs that relate to family literacy. We asked people to tell us how they are using the Internet and the World Wide Web in their programs. Following are some of the responses:

- In one program, computer technology is being used in Even Start and ABE classes. Adult students have access to the Internet from their classroom and participate in worldwide classroom projects. A Web page for the Even Start Program is being developed. Teleconferencing to broadcast Spanish GED classes is being planned.
- In a Texas school district family literacy program, parents can take computer literacy classes on their child's classes. They can attend the classes before or in between their ABE or parenting classes. Because they use the same computers, classrooms, and personnel for both children and parents, there is a cost saving.
- *Families and Their Work* is a Web page of the Santa Ana College's family literacy Web project (http://www.otan.dni.us/webfarm/emailproject/family.htm). It includes pictures drawn by children accompanied by stories of family customs.
- The Family Success program in Centralia, Illinois, uses a Center of Excellence lab for families enrolled in ESL classes. The families make books and do techno-scavenger hunts among other projects. Programs are provided in 10 locations throughout the college district.
- Literacy Volunteers, with the support of the GTE Foundation, created a model to bring computer technology and computer-assisted instruction into LVA family literacy programs. The model involves the use of technology with parents, children, and families as well as the use of technology to support the Family Learning Center. ■